

An obsession with precision and point of view, a love of irony, understatement and subtlety slip into David Miller's photographs. They also surface with the same persistence in our friendship.

He is a classical music fanatic who owns a record library of quality and expansiveness. And a record washing machine to get the dust out of the grooves. Once he told me a story which helped me to understand his work better. Listening to five different recordings of a Beethoven sonata, he and his sister argued about structure. Each used the same reasoning to defend a preference. Days later, David concluded that they had two different concepts of structuralism. She was concerned with structure as overall form; he viewed structure as a component, the essential grid independent of the final product. By his own admission, this is reflected in his photographs, especially the ones of construction sites. The final structure, the apex of the architect's struggle, is rarely evident; we see the internal skeleton, the support system for the facade.

David has a background in science. In lay terms, it seems to me that people in a scientific discipline study the infrastructure and pay less attention to the surface image. He is also like a mechanic, a tinkering photo mechanic who takes an image apart, reconstructs and tunes it. It works with precision because of the handling of the individual elements.

David's current work, photos of construction sites and parking lots, is a logical vehicle for structural concerns. The urban architectural environment is the central theme. There are buildings to be finished in the future, others which have been dug under to make space for car parks, and facades which serve as backdrops; signs of the future, references to the past. All these sites have an inherent grid pattern: the girders and pylons of buildings under construction, the painted white lines of parking slots, the obsessive regularity of office building facades. These grids are appropriated and used as a formal component to build the image and as a symbol to reinforce the commentary on our environment. "Palais de Justice, north facade, August 1981" plays on this idea. The lower third of the photo is occupied by regimented cars; the upper portion accommodates part of a public office building. A tirelessly regular grid of mirrored windows flattens the space. But at the upper edge, the monotony is broken. Someone has scraped away the mirror finish on one window. Someone sees the parking lot below.

The grid performs multiple functions. It evokes a logic or pseudo-scientific system of space regulation. It flattens the surface. It defines a space within the image, yet implies that the picture extends beyond itself, that it is a fragment cropped from a larger scene. It underscores the regularity of existing structures and highlights any defect or break in the system.¹.

1. For a more extensive, sometimes different analysis of grid systems, see Rosalind Krauss' "Grids" October 9, Summer 1979, pp.51-64

Occasionally, the uniformity of contemporary buildings is counterbalanced by the non-uniform facades of triplexes bordered by parking lots. The same slot system is used, but the building as backdrop can't offer identical windows. Sometimes turn-of-the century buildings flaunt their individuality. Rows of windows differ, structures distinguish themselves from adjacent ones. Other sites are examined: a parking lot in front of a depressing, deteriorating apartment block, the vastness of a car park desert, an entrance to underground parking. The phenomenon in urban centres creeps insidiously into outer limits and below the surface.

In the photographs "Complex Desjardins from the Palais des Congrès (under construction), looking north. March 1981" and "Silverlane Parking. Construction of the Palais des Congrès. March 1981," parking lots and construction sites co-exist. In the first ^{image,} ~~Palais des Congrès~~, a large convention complex in Montreal, ^A ~~Palais des Congrès~~ is sandwiched between parking spaces with name tags and a commercial, hotel and office conglomerate, Place Desjardins. Mr. X. parks here and by implication, Mr. Y. works behind this rectangle, or eventually will. In the second image, a decrepit and defunct Silverlane parking facility is the foreground subject for construction girders on the same site. ~~the~~ ^{and} ~~Palais des Congrès~~. Borrowing a tactic from his earlier work, notably the photographs of grain elevators in the port of Montreal, David moves around one site ~~x~~ ^{and} photographs from different vantage points, on different days, during different

stages of construction to place the site in context. This activity confirms an attitude of patient thoroughness towards the study of the environment and the act of photographing it.

The construction sites have their own inherent structural grid, at first a frame-like Mechano set, visible and transparent, allowing the city to filter through. As time passes, the structures develop into masses of reinforced concrete or interlocking grids of girders, more complex and opaque. The background is obscured, leaving only the tallest building to hover above. The finished product is never seen. We only know that the methods of construction from one site to another are similar,^{and}, no matter what the outcome, that the structure will add to the concrete jungle dwarfing less uniform architecture from the past.

One particular trait of the construction photos is their density of information. Details pile up. This density is heightened by both camera and print manipulation. David's familiarity with large format allows him to adjust the landscape at will within the parameters of camera mechanics. Careful placement of elements within the frame assures clarity and separation. And sometimes invokes subtle irony. A wrecking ball hanging from a crane is aligned with the edge of an existing building behind the construction site. Today an office building, tomorrow a parking lot. Camera adjustments are not merely used to subvert purist documentary photographs, but function in the commentary and construction of the image.

Copious detail is further rescued from confusion by image quality. These are 11 x 14 contact prints; grain is not an element in David's photographic vocabulary. A shadow detail fetish adds texture, cracks and crevices to the surface of the structures. It intensifies detailed information but with clarity.

There is a counterpoint to this obsession with compounded detail and information. Somewhat minor in relation to the parking lot and construction site series, close-ups of industrial facades are minimal in terms of informational content. There is no piling up of details. There is of course no grain, but texture, tone and surface in abundance. This work betrays a sixties minimalist preference, but exists as a contradiction, a key within the context of the other work.

The inspiration for much of David's work comes from nineteenth century sources, not the contemporary photographic community. He is one of the most competent, opinionated photo historians that I know. Stored impeccably in his study is a collection of nineteenth century photographs, with emphasis on the picturesque in English and Scottish views between 1850 and 1880 and its application to the interpretation of Canadian landscape. I don't want to be misleading. He also has numerous portraits, nineteenth century topographical views from many other countries and even twentieth century work. But his obsession with the picturesque of the nineteenth century leaks into his own photographs, translated into contemporary terms. The parks and

countryside of England, France and Italy become our pervasive urban concept, parking lots. How sweet the smell of irony! The prescribed formalism of the nineteenth century,² foreground greenery, water and mountain vistas,² gives way to a contemporary equivalent, the grid system.

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Another aspect of David's work, urban topographical views, wide open foreground spaces usually at street intersections, borrows from nineteenth century stereographs. But the original purpose of paired stereo images to create a third dimension is flipped. The empty asphalt intersections, with no foreground object as a reference point, give an illusion of flatness.

Other touchstones and technical idiosyncracies also find their way into his work. The occasional blur of moving people and trees recalls photos of the last century.

Similarly, the flag, symbol of patriotism in the nineteenth century, was often subverted by the slowness of early photographic materials. With adept strokes by a retoucher, a blur became a clearly delineated rectangle. Paying tribute to the past and its symbolic clues, David patiently waits for the flag to unfurl and registers it flying flat out.

2. Samuel Bourne:..."they (the Himalayas) consist chiefly of ravine passes and mountain ranges - without verdure, without foliage, and without water; and a photograph without these three elements must possess very striking compensation features indeed to render it a pleasing and enjoyable picture."

Quoted in Samuel Bourne 1834-1912; Photographic Views of India; introduction by Roger Taylor; Sheffield City Polytechnic, England 1980; p. 6.

Irony, contradiction, subtlety and precision

← co-exist with other commentary, modifying interpretation of the city. Skylines are broken by a mix of past and present architecture; ← deteriorating structures rub against the new and shiny. The contradictions raise questions, irony slips in quietly. The arm of a back hoe inscribed with "American" cuts precisely into Canadian soil. Shadow encroaches on receding sunlight. Sometimes a sense of humour is overwhelmed by pessimism. Stone slabs from a dismantled building line up on a grassy plot facing the city. A funereal aura colours the picture.

Perhaps David's "vision" is also coloured by the nineteenth century. A conversation with a former student, Terri Joseph, during the Montreal Film Festival illustrates his peculiar tendencies:

- T. Have you seen any of the films?
- D. Are you kidding?
- T. They move too fast to be seen carefully, right?
- D. Something like that.
- T. Well, it certainly is a unique view of the twentieth century.

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